WEEKEND RELIGION
Deuteronomy 5:12-15
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I encountered some striking information recently about time and how we use it. In an average American lifetime:

2.3 years will be spent eating,
4.5 years will be devoted to going to school,
we will work a total of 7½ years,
and five years will be consumed in miscellaneous activity, mostly traveling between places,
sleeping will absorb 24 years out of a 70 year life,
and, on average, we have at our disposal 27 years out of 70, for leisure time activity.

I was absolutely stunned by that. My surface impression is that leisure time is a myth, a promotional creation perhaps of the people who make tennis rackets and camping equipment. Most of the folks I know hardly seem to have time for life's necessities. Twenty-seven years? Most of us can't remember 27 consecutive minutes.

The person from whom I heard the figure is the Director of Parks and Public Recreation for the city of Detroit, a thoughtful and careful Christian who is concerned about American inability to deal with the idea of leisure. My surprise, he told me when I challenged the data, is part of the problem. "How much of the busyness you observe is necessary?" he asked. "How much of it is vital for life, and how much is self-imposed?" Civic duty, religious activity, attending board meetings, quasi-professional activity - is leisure time. So is the time we chose to invest in a profession for which there is no direct financial reward. It's not necessarily bad, he said; in fact it's marvelous when an individual loves a job enough to invest leisure time in it. It's helpful, however, to be self-conscious about that, to see what one is doing and to own the responsibility for that decision.

Meanwhile, the data continue to be substantiated: 27 years: one third of life is leisure. There is a small percentage of the population working after hours, long into the night. Most, however, work forty hours and less. If you need to do business on the telephone on Friday afternoon, you know about the less part. Futurists are not absolutely sure of much, but most of them sound certain that time saving technology, for all the headaches it creates currently, does, in fact save time and will, in fact, continue to shorten the routine processes upon which our civilization rests.

Forced retirement at 65 and increasing life expectancy constitute another part of the equation. Sixty-five year olds have a very significant chunk of time with which to deal, all of it leisure. The involuntary idleness of unemployment is another part. The 45 year old executive, suddenly and without warning released from a job, used to be a stereotype for sociology classes. Now it's very likely someone you know. The 55 year old whose job was abolished and who is too experienced and too well-paid to start again and who decides to take early retirement - thus adding a decade at least to the leisure time column, used to be a safe abstraction. Today he is a neighbor.

The attendant problems, of course, are immense. People who have believed devoutly in the work ethic, dutifully predicating their sense of self-worth on their ability to produce fall into severe emotional crisis, guilt and depression, when

there is no work to do. Sound, healthy marriages develop stress fractures when a man and woman who saw one another a few hours a day some days are suddenly thrown together every day, all day.

Give or take a few years, every one of us will have more leisure time than we will have time for anything else. It is a modern phenomenon. Fred Graham, professor of religious studies at Michigan State, wrote an essay on the sudden and dramatic concern Americans seem to have with physical fitness. It has to do, he believes, with our fear that we will end our lives sitting motionless, in a nursing home. He writes, "Our ancestors scarcely knew the anxiety of terminal helplessness, at least in its present form. When illness laid them low in their advanced years, pneumonia quickly finished them off. Today we know we can live for years lying in a hospital bed." (Christian Century, August 1979, p. 822)

It is also a particularly Western problem. A young Peace Corps volunteer was in Nigeria and decided to resume his regimen of leisure time activity, namely jogging. One early evening he started, on the road through the village in which he was living. He had not run very far when he was joined by two farmers on bicycles, peddling home after a long day in their fields. "You got trouble?", one asked. "Oh, no", he said. "You need help?", the other farmer inquired. "No, thank you", he puffed. "Everything is OK." The cyclists advanced, then slowed down and the farmer tried again. "You run", one noted. "Yes...I run." "You run", the other persisted, "where?" "Up the road", the young man snapped. "You run up the road." the two echoed. Again they advanced, and again drew back beside him. "No trouble. You run up road? Why you run up road?" Finally he stopped. Carefully he explained, "I run up road to get exercise." "Exercise", one responded. "What is exercise?" The young man reflected: "For a long moment I stood there, my mouth open, beginning to sense the scene's absurdity: Two thin, overworked farmers, sitting astride broken down bicycles...an over-caloried white man in canvas shoes running nowhere to get something no one here had ever heard of." (A.D. Magazine, February 1982, p. 28)

It is a modern problem and it is a western problem and we deal with it in varied and exotic ways. We play tennis, racket ball, and finally we run. We have and will have a lot of time on our hands. We do not need another activity. What we do need is better understanding and one of the resources we can employ to help us understand our situation and deal creatively with it is the ancient Helbaic concept of Sabbath, a special, holy time, away from all the other time.

The Babylonians devised the seven day week: the Romans named each of the days for a deity. The current names of the week days derive from Scandanavian Gods: Wednesday from Woden, Thursday from Thor.

But the idea of one out of every seven set apart for rest and recreation; the idea that the pattern is part of the fabric of creation; the notion that observing a Sabbath is vital to health and happiness - is pure Judaism and pure genius. It has been confirmed over and over again, there is fundamental truth in the ancient word. Healthy, happy, vital life depends on a rhythmic motion between hard work and leisure, stress and relaxation, effort and no effort.

The idea has been vulnerable to distortion, however. One of the earliest conflicts in his ministry occurred when Jesus' disciples picked a few grains of wheat on the Sabbath. Technically they had broken the Sabbath law prohibiting harvesting. When he was challenged he responded, "The Sabbath was made for the good of man: man was not made for the Sabbath."

Human beings are notorious for establishing institutions, customs, laws around an idea which is important. And before the ink is dry the customs and laws and the institutions are assuming more importance than the original idea itself. Thus the relentless distortion of the idea of the Sabbath. By Jesus' time the original Sabbath idea had become a labyrinth of taboos and restrictions. For instance, work was prohibited: burdens could not be borne on the Sabbath. It was legal to carry a child, but not if the child was holding a stone.

The earliest Christians did not observe Sabbath at all. Their Lord's Day was the first day of the week, a work day like all the rest, different only in that they met for worship early in the morning to remember and celebrate the Lord's resurrection. But gradually, over the centuries, the idea of a Sabbath reemerged and was combined with the Lord's Day and the rest is history. Distortions have characterized the custom rather than creativity. Scots Presbyterians condemned the first trains which operated on Sunday. In order to prevent frivolity on the Sabbath it was impossible and illegal until recently, to buy a drink in Scotland on Sunday in one's own town. Travelers, however, were exempt from the restriction. Inns could serve whiskey, but only to travelers. The result was that thirsty Scots Presbyterians traditionaly drove to the next town for lunch after church. A Scottish woman we knew told us about sitting in church, totally preoccupied with the beautiful salmon reposing in the pool in the stream on her property, and deciding to cast caution and propriety and piety to the winds, to break the law and pull him out after church. The Reformers tried to abolish the idea of a Sabbath because of its excesses and distortions. As if to prove them correct, the Puritans, when they gained control of Britain under Cromwell in the next century "enacted a series of severe Sunday laws including some which outlawed 'vain and profane walking' on the Sabbath. For good measure they turned Christmas into a penitential fast and ordered every Maypole in the realm cut down." (see William Barclay, The Ten Commandments for Today, p. 36)

More important, however, is the philosophic distortion which accompanied Sabbath silliness; namely that work is the only source of meaning, that financial reward is the only purpose of work, that being unrewarded and/or unoccupied is somehow the equivalent of meaninglessness or immorality. That Puritan legacy is with us still and combined with the simple fact of the leisure each of us will have can result in disaster.

The recovery I propose begins with a faithful reaffirmation of the Sabbath, the special time whose observance is not only the means to make the rest of time more valuable, but an end in itself. And it ought to proceed with the recovery of a theology of leisure, a theology of play, if you will.

The church, in recent years, has worked very hard at the illusive goal of relevance: relevance to the market place, the real world of commerce, politics, education. It has been an exciting and necessary venture. But, in terms of the time you and I have on this earth, reality is at least partly leisure. My suggestion is that nothing could be more relevant than a religion that knows what the weekend means as well as the market place.

Sam Keen, in a superb little book, To a Dancing God, suggested that our problem is time keeping. We have sold out to mechanical chronology. Keen wrote, "We march to the beat of an alien pacemaker, eating when the clock strikes 8, 12 and 6, working five times eight hours per week.....Who can deny that it is well for the trains to run on time.....By ordering time in abstract modules we have been rewarded with what we consider a 'higher standard of living'. But what have we lost in the transition?" (p. 53)

What we have lost, obviously, is the ability to play; the gracious, graceful ability to accept the moment for what it is, to live it fully, to respond to it naturally, to "consider the lilies", in Jesus' words.

Political philosopher Michael Novaks wrote a very good book several years ago called the Joy of Sports. Novak is hardly indolent and unmotivated. In fact, he was born and grew up in the coal and steel regions of Western Pennsylvania. He speaks a language I well recall. Yet he writes, "Play, not work, is the end of life .....The modern age.....nourishes illusions. In Protestant cultures as in Marxist cultures, work is serious, important, adult. Its essential insignificance is overlooked. Work, of course, must be done. But we should be wise enough to distinguish necessity from reality. Play is reality." (p. 40)

Playfully, he suggests "Sports pages printed the critical dispatches. They celebrate the essential human qualities. They tell the truth about human life. They carry minimal illusions. It is the good sense of most humans that leads them to look first at the sports pages, second at the news of the world." (p. 42)

Only partially with tongue in cheek the political philosopher proposes American baseball as the perfect human activity. Baseball is theologically appropriate because its context is infinity...the absence of time. He writes, "Baseball pays no attention to the clock. However long an inning takes, it takes; games may last two hours or five.....In baseball clock time does not exist. Time is measured by outs - three outs per inning.....nine innings per game.....162 games constitute a year." (p. 126)

Or in the words of Bill Lee, recently released from the Montreal Expos, for his persistent playfulness when a reporter asked where he planned to work next, "Why, I haven't worked a day since I was eight years old."

Thanks to psychology and Transactional Analysis we have learned that there is a child in each of us: a child who is essential, joyful, affirming, playful; a child God created and loves; a child whose playfulness is part of who we are. TA taught us to value play as well as work and it came right out and suggested that we have a demonic way of turning all of life into work - even our sexuality, the very essence of the child in us. One of the first major fights I experienced in the Presbyterian Church was over our General Assembly's report on Human Sexuality. I will never forget the vigorous debate on the floor of Presbytery. A minister was attacking the report, not only its position, but the simple fact that the church should have something to say about the subject. After a time, one of the elder statesmen rose, suggested quietly that in four decades of ministry he couldn't recall too many people seeking counseling because they didn't know how to work, pray, sing hymns or read the Bible. But he couldn't remember a week that someone had not presented a great deal of pain related to human sexuality.

There is a child in each of us. Our wholeness depends on its health.

Our needs, it seems to me, are urgent.....and they are two in number. We need, first, a recovered, revitalized idea of the Sabbath; time spent in rest, recreation, leisure, for its own sake. We need to take time to play, learn how to play.

Second, we need to prepare for, appreciate, and meaningfully use the leisure time which we find at our disposal. We need to be honest about the commitments we have already made for our leisure time. We need, rather critically, I would submit, to acknowledge that ahead of all of us is a time when the hours and the days will be ours to use as we wish.

It is not simple. It is not easy. Calling attention to it does not make it a reality. Paul Tillich taught us that "the demons take our anxieties and magnify them into raging psychic needs whose feeding threatens our sanity." (Graham, op. cit.) We live in a time which exaggerates normal anxieties about meaningless and we have seen those anxieties become obsession so that work is all that matters in life. The Gospel of Jesus Christ addresses this. It addresses us in our wholeness. In Jesus Christ God has affirmed our humanity. And in his ministry our life has been confirmed.

The Sabbath was made for us, he said one time, a gift for our health and sanity, and peace.

Salvation means knowing God's love for us and our freedom in his love, to live life in all its fullness -- work and play, Monday - Friday and Sabbath; weekdays - weekends -- in the gracious freedom of God's love. Amen.